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News Release



00-214

December 21, 2000

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CRITICAL HABITAT PROPOSED **FOR KOOTENAI RIVER WHITE STURGEON**

Public Hearing Planned

Responding to a court order, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today proposed designating 11.2 miles of the Kootenai River in northern Idaho as critical habitat for the endangered Kootenai River white sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*). Today's announcement is the result of a lawsuit filed June 30, 1999, by the Center for Biological Diversity.

The proposed critical habitat area is entirely within Boundary County, Idaho, and is managed by the state of Idaho. It begins 31 miles downstream from Libby Dam at Bonner's Ferry and extends downstream to river mile 141.4, below Shorty's Island. The proposed area includes the only known spawning and early-life stage rearing sites for the Kootenai River population of white sturgeon.

Critical habitat refers to specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations. A critical habitat designation on state-owned property, such as the proposed stretch of the Kootenai River, requires consultation with the Service only if activities on that stretch of river require Federal funding or permits.

Today's proposal is not expected to affect recreational fisheries on the river or state activities that do not require a Federal permit. The proposal also is not expected to affect activities of the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, including the Tribe's aquaculture program, where juvenile Kootenai River white sturgeon are raised for release as part of the species' recovery program.

A public hearing of the proposed critical habitat designation will be held in Bonners Ferry, Idaho, on January 18, 2001, from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Best Western Kootenai River Inn, 7160 Plaza Road.

The Kootenai River white sturgeon was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 1994. A

recovery plan for the species was published November 2, 1999. The fish inhabits and migrates freely in the Kootenai River from Kootenai Falls in Montana downstream into Kootenay Lake in British Columbia, Canada. This population is considered a genetically distinct, interbreeding population that has been isolated from other white sturgeon populations in the Columbia River Basin for about 10,000 years. Biologists believe change in the flow of the river due to dam operations is the primary threat to the Kootenai River white sturgeon's continued survival, adversely affecting egg survival in the river.

"We believe that designation of this reach of the Kootenai River as critical habitat will likely provide some conservation benefit to the Kootenai River population of white sturgeon," said Anne Badgley, Regional Director of the Service's Pacific region. "We still have much to learn about the long-term needs of this species."

A critical habitat designation does not set up a preserve or refuge and only applies to situations where Federal funding or a Federal permit is involved. It has no specific regulatory impact on landowners taking actions on their land that do not involve Federal funding or permits. However, under other provisions of the Endangered Species Act, landowners must consult with the Service before taking actions on their property that could harm or kill protected species or destroy their habitat.

The Service has completed formal consultations under the Act with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration and the Bureau of Reclamation on operations of the Federal Columbia River Power System and issued a Biological Opinion on December 21, 2000. Based on the dam operations proposed by these agencies and on status of the Kootenai River white sturgeon, the Service concluded operations of the FCRPS would jeopardize sturgeon. Reasonable and prudent measures to avoid jeopardy were included in the Service's final biological opinion. They address four main areas: water storage, increased release capacity at Libby Dam, flood stage constraints and a conservation aquaculture program.

A complete copy of the proposal to designate critical habitat for the Kootenai River white sturgeon was published in today's *Federal Register*. Comments on the proposed rule must be received by February 20, 2001.

Written comments may be submitted to Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Upper Columbia Fish and Wildlife Office, 11103 East Montgomery, Spokane, Washington 99206. E-mail comments must be submitted in ASCII file format without use of special characters or encryption. Please include "Attn: RIN Number 1018-AH06" and your name and return address in your e-mail message. If you do not receive a confirmation from the system that we have received your e-mail message, contact us directly by calling our Upper Columbia Fish and Wildlife Office at phone number 509-891-6839. You may send comments by e-mail to FW1SPOK_crithab_stur@R1.fws.gov

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 530 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

